

History of the Woolston Eyes Area

Not much is known about the area known as the Eyes before the Middle Ages, but we know people were in the area during the Bronze Age, and that the Anglo-Saxons reached the region around 700 AD. In fact the word 'Ees' is Saxon for land near a looping watercourse, so the Germanic settlers must have arrived on the banks of the Mersey about this time. Records begin around 500 years later.

Land ownership in the township of Thelwall was fairly stable between 1300 and 1536. During medieval times a third was owned by the Clayton family and the rest by the priory of Norton. The priors owned the valuable fishing rights for the south side of the River Mersey, which if the catches of 1749 were anything to go by, (19 and 23 pound salmon landed in May of that year) were fairly substantial.

At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 all monastic land passed to the crown and all Norton Priory's former possessions were subsequently sold to the Claytons who thus acquired the whole of Thelwall as a private estate. They sold out to the Brookes, who interestingly had purchased Norton priory itself in the 1530s, and may have been seeking to unite its former possessions. However, they in turn sold Thelwall to the Moores, and it changed hands again to the Pickering family, who probably had control of the land by the 1770s when a bridge over the newly built Bridgewater canal was named after them. Thelwall remained in private hands until the late 19th century, when the township was incorporated into Runcorn District Council.

During the winter months the Mersey flooded across the meadows of Thelwall (the village itself situated on slightly higher ground). In the summer it is likely that sheep were grazed on the fertile fields which were probably too wet for arable cultivation in a pre land drain era. Regular references to the Claytons as being 'of Shepecrofte' may point to this.

At the time of the famous salmon hauls of the mid 18th century, certain transformations to the Ees meadows were underway, as the effects of the Industrial Revolution began to be felt. Powder mills with workers cottages were constructed where the north bank of No.2 bed currently stands. Woolston Old Cut was the first navigational improvement undertaken across the north bank of No.3 bed (just north of where the new weir was recently dug), and had occurred by 1777, as testified to by a map of that date. The short canal, or New Cut, further shortened the journey down the river by cutting out the loop of what is now Nos 3 and 4 beds, and wharves were constructed at the southern end of Weir Lane, for boats and goods to transfer onto the canal. On the South bank of the Mersey stood Satham Chemical works. The powder mills were built in 1755, and lasted exactly a century before, ironically, being destroyed by an explosion.

The major change to the area was the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal in 1896, which radically altered the landscape, beyond simply the imposing presence of the new waterway itself. The long meanders of the Mersey through Satham were cut off and became redundant, as did the old canals to the north and the wharves. The old water meadows largely disappeared under the deposit grounds which were constructed from the 1920's onwards. The various farmsteads which had managed a living on these lowlands ceased to exist with the arrival of the first dredgings, except for the Wilgreaves' which continued as a working farm until No.3 bed was constructed upon the site in the late 1950's. The old farming lifestyle which had existed up to then was swept away.

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